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ABSTRACT

In the student-oriented approach to writing business letters, students work in small groups to write a series of letters. For the first letter, the groups take the role of consumers, writing letters to order merchandise. The letters are written on overhead transparencies and are then critiqued by the other teams, with an emphasis on constructive help. The remaining letters in the series are the order acceptance letter, for which the teams act as an employee of the company to which the first letter was sent; the complaint letter, in which the consumer tells of a problem with the merchandise purchased; and the adjustment letter, in which a company employee answers the complaint letter. Using this approach, students concentrate on making critical communication decisions and learn from what others write and say. (Guidelines are provided to aid in evaluating the different types of letters.) (GW)

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LET'S WRITE IT RIGHT! A STUDENT-ORIENTED APPROACH FOR TEACHING LETTERWRITING SKILLS

Most college students find business letter writing painful. Throughout elementary and secondary school, writing exercises were boring, frustrating, and useless; the exercises were for the teacher and for a grade. These exercises taught students to have negative attitudes toward written communication primarily because there was no relationship between the actual writing of business letters and the business world itself.[1]

This negative attitude of students might be attributed to the approach used in teaching written communication and, in this case, business letter writing specifically. There are many approaches used by instructors to teach business letter writing; some approaches are the teacher-directed approach, the content-based approach, the problem-solving approach, and an assortment of experimental approaches. Business educators who face this dilemma of motivating students to improve letterwriting skills may use a particular approach or a combination of approaches.

The problem-solving approach, promoted by Rosemary Fruehling, utilizes case studies which students read and then react to by writing an appropriate communication.[2] Church's career-oriented approach directs emphasis on human relations and careers in the business world; role playing is very important.[3] These approaches emphasize the concept that students like to be active participants in the learning process, and they must be interested if they are to learn.

The student-oriented approach combines the problem-solving technique with an emphasis on human relations. The approach

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capitalizes on three points: (1) teamwork, (2) role playing, and (3) decision making. The teacher acts as coach and referee. The simple process follows:

LETTER ONE: THE ORDER LETTER

Students work in teams of three, four, or five for the entire series of letters. Each team takes the role of the consumer; each team selects a team member (with acceptable penmanship) who is responsible for transferring the letter to a transparency.[4] The instructor distributes a pertinent periodical (such as the Wall Street Journal), a transparency, and an appropriate pen to each group. A transparency is placed on an overhead projector and projected on a screen which displays an order letter format. The instructor explains the process step by step: (1) the groups are to find an advertisement from which they want to order merchandise; it is strictly up to the team what is ordered. Items ordered can range from something as far-fetched as a castle complete with moat and drawbridge to something as practical as a curling iron. (2) The team composes the letter and its "writer" drafts a rough copy on paper. (3) A final letter is copied onto a transparency to be critiqued by the other teams. (4) The instructor collects the transparencies for peer evaluation. (5) One by one the letters are evaluated by the entire class. Peer evaluation is aimed toward group efforts rather than individuals within a group.

Before the peer evaluation begins, the following guidelines are discussed to aid in a positive evaluation process:[5]

1. What is the main point?
2. If you can't find the main point, or there is no adequate support for it, is there faulty organization?
3. Is there "flow?"
4. Are there transition gaps, punctuation errors, grammar errors, poor sentence or paragraph structure?

These steps keep the thoughts and comments constructive rather than negative and sarcastic. Through the peer evaluation process, help is offered. No "this is lousy, do it over" comments are allowed!

LETTER TWO: THE ORDER ACCEPTANCE LETTER

In the next class session, each team acts as the office employee who works for the company to which the letter was sent. Actual group letter writing may be completed or a teacher-led discussion may be an alternative to examine various components of this type of letter. Once again, a transparency may be an effective aid. The groups are to assume that the merchandise will be sent to the consumer.

LETTER THREE: THE COMPLAINT LETTER

The teams are consumers again. Time has passed and something has gone wrong with the product which was purchased. The teams decide what failed with the product and whether or not the product is still under warranty. The instructor discusses the steps in writing the complaint letter. Tone, completeness, clarity, sequence of pattern, and the "you attitude" (putting yourself in the shoes of the person receiving the letter) are discussed in detail. Again, the teams draft a letter and

transfer a final copy on a transparency for peer evaluation. During the peer evaluation, groups discuss these questions about each letter:

1. What does the consumer want to accomplish?
2. How does the consumer do this?
3. Has the purpose been accomplished in this letter?
4. How will the office employee react to this letter?
5. Will the tone of the complaint letter affect the tone in the answer the employee must write?

If these questions are not answered satisfactorily, the letters are returned to the teams and are rewritten.

LETTER FOUR: THE ADJUSTMENT LETTER

Each team takes the role of the office employee who must answer the complaint letter. Four guidelines are considered in a teacher-led discussion:

1. The complaint letter should be answered promptly.
2. The answer is important to the person who wrote the complaint letter as well as to the employee and the image of the company.
3. The answer should be congenial; no finger should be pointed, no arrogance or sarcasm should be reflected.
4. The answer should be honest, courteous, and complete.

The students find this a difficult letter to construct. The decisions, such as warranty, repair costs, etc., are made by the group. Once again, the final drafts are transferred to a transparency and peer critiqued with possible revisions resulting in even more effective written communication.

OBJECTIVES OBTAINED

With the student-oriented approach, students enjoy the freedom to be decision makers in writing the series of letters. The decisions made in the group transfer to each individual so that he/she is equipped with decision-making tools when writing letters independently. The student involvement and interaction in both oral and written communication throughout the entire letterwriting process seems to enhance the individual's ability to function in a business setting whether communicating orally or through the written word.

Within this approach, students are able to concentrate on making critical communication decisions. The students see, hear, and learn from what others write and say. The student-oriented approach is an enjoyable one for students and instructor in order to improve letter writing.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Zoerner, C. E. Jr., "Teaching the Vanquished to Write," The Journal of Business Communication, Vol. 13, No. 1, Fall, 1975, p. 34.

[2]Fruehling, Rosemary T., "Using the Problem-Solving Approach to Business Writing," Business Education World, November-December, 1973, p. 5.

[3]Church, Olive. "A Career-Oriented Experimental Communications Unit," Business Education World, November-December, 1975, p. 23.

[4]Hemphell, P. D. "Teaching Business Communications in Community College," The Journal of Business Communication, Vol 13, No. 1, Fall, 1975, pp. 48-49.

[5]Weeks, Francis W., Principles of Business Communications, Stipes Publishing Company, Champaign, Illinois, 1973, pp. 125-6.